

On Transcendental and Non-Transcendental Idealism in Husserl: A Response to De Palma and Loidolt

Julia Jansen

KU Leuven*

julia.jansen@kuleuven.be

* *Correspondence:* Husserl-Archives: Centre for Phenomenology and Continental Philosophy Kardinaal Mercierplein 2 - box 3200 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

Husserl never understood why his championing of a phenomenological “transcendental idealism” caused such strong objections and, at its most extreme, resentments. He considered the dispute between idealism and realism, which ignited over the publication of his *Ideas I*, «sterile (*unfruchtbar*)» and «unphilosophical» (HUSSERL 1930, 563)¹. And yet, it seems that the reception of Husserl’s work goes through regular cycles of this very dispute. We are therefore left with the question: why does it seem impossible to settle this issue? One answer lies in the very nature of Husserl’s thought. On the one hand, Husserl’s ambitions paralleled those of Kant who, as Mendelssohn famously claimed, was a «total crusher (*der Alleszermalmer*)», refuting rational psychology, philosophical cosmology, and rational theology in one fell swoop (and, in fact, in one book). On the other hand, Husserl proceeded more like a “total synthesizer”, continuously incorporating already available ideas and frameworks (historical or contemporary) and “turning” them into moments of his phenomenology. This eclecticism, however, was not arbitrary. Husserl seems to have genuinely believed that the greatest minds of the past and present tended to get it right in certain respects, but that their notions (mostly because of deeply entrenched prejudices that obscured their views) were still in need of phenomenological clarification, by means of which the fundamental insights lying dormant in their positions could be unlocked and put to proper use. It is therefore not at all surprising that realists and idealists should both find themselves confirmed, or, perhaps more significantly, contradicted in Husserl’s writings.

That said, the accusation of idealism has always been more cutting and more damning than that of realism. Being called a “realist” just does not sound like much of an insult – this was true at Husserl’s time, and it remains true today. This is no trivial point. Husserl insisted on

1 Unless I give the translation in the bibliography, the English translations of the German texts referred to in this article are mine.

his idealism largely *against* realist common sense, which paradoxically had been, at least in part, responsible for the success of his “realist” *Logical Investigations*. However, when the *Logical Investigations* were first published, philosophical discourse was still mostly entangled in different (even opposing) views that all could be considered “psychologistic” in the sense that they advocated either a priori mental or empirical psychological foundations for logic and the other sciences. By the time *Ideas I* was published, the landscape had shifted. Husserl increasingly saw the general attitude of “objectivism”, or “naturalism”, as his main target, as it was rapidly and relentlessly gaining momentum in all areas of life. More specifically, his “transcendental idealism” was meant to deny (as Kant’s had done) the bivalence of the idealism-realism debate, which Husserl dismissed as still moving «on the level of naturalism (*auf dem natürlichen Boden*)» (HUSSERL 1930, 563). That Husserl’s professed idealism can still, more than 100 years after the publication of *Ideas I*, attract philosophical interest likely has to do with the fact that today realism reigns more powerfully than ever. That the qualification of idealism by the term “transcendental” has left many unconvinced of its power to eradicate the problems associated with idealism, likely has to do with this realism’s naturalist bent, which considers transcendental idealism just as “anti-realist” as idealism *simpliciter*.

That Husserl claimed the title “transcendental idealism” for his phenomenology is not at issue, even though he did not wish to have his phenomenology reduced to simply a new version of idealism. As he remarked sternly, «transcendental phenomenology is no theory merely there to provide answers to the historical problem of idealism” (HUSSERL 1930, 419). Yet, the self-sufficiency of phenomenology notwithstanding, he also insisted that the label “transcendental idealism” was not just one of expediency (let’s say, to ease-in the audience, for whom his phenomenology was so radically new, with connections to traditional, more familiar models). It clearly was no matter of “pedagogy” or “public relations” (and how ill chosen the label would have been for that purpose).

Husserl is genuinely convinced that there is an *intrinsic* relation between phenomenology and transcendental idealism. In his 1930 epilogue to *Ideas I*, that is, after 17 years of public objections against his transcendental idealist position, Husserl insists:

I may not here neglect (...) to declare expressly that I retract nothing whatsoever as regards transcendental-phenomenological idealism and that I still consider, as I did before, every form of the usual philosophical realism nonsensical in principle, no less so than that idealism which it sets itself up against in its argumentations and which it 'refutes'. (Husserl 1930, 560)

In the *Cartesian Meditations* (published in French just one year later) he is even more adamant and even claims that ...

(...) phenomenology is eo ipso 'transcendental idealism', though in a fundamentally and essentially new sense. (...) The proof of this idealism is therefore phenomenology itself. Only someone who misunderstands either the deepest sense of intentional method, or that of transcendental reduction, perhaps both, can attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism. (Hua 1, 118 f.)

I take it that it is precisely these kinds of formulations that irk Vittorio De Palma. Why call it "transcendental idealism" if one gives it "a fundamentally and essentially new sense"? In particular, why call it "transcendental idealism" and hence why pledge allegiance to some form of Kantianism if the fundamental differences to Kant's transcendental idealism are all too apparent? Both De Palma and Sophie Loidolt, in their contributions to *Metodo* (2015, Special Issue I/1), identify some of these fundamental differences with great precision.

Loidolt sees Husserl's transcendental idealism first and foremost as an idealism, which rides on the «radical distinction of the modes of

being ‘consciousness’ and ‘reality’» (LOIDOLT 2015, 117).² Although Loidolt acknowledges that this dualism is «revealed by the phenomenological reduction» (IBID., 117), she believes that it «can hardly be traced back to a transcendental argument, but is [instead] rooted in an ontological insight, viz., rests on ontological arguments» (IBID., 118 f.). This assessment resonates with a relatively wide-spread perception, one that is shared also by De Palma, namely that Husserl’s assertion of the primacy of consciousness over reality is not part of a “transcendental” register, but in fact betrays «the legacy of Brentano which Husserl never overcame», ultimately a non-transcendental idealism that as such is no more than «a residue of psychologism» (DE PALMA 2015, 42). In this respect, De Palma argues that the transcendental reduction is in fact dispensable because an eidetic reduction already does the trick (IBID. 18).

Such an eidetic reduction by itself already yields the fundamental difference between the being of consciousness and the being of reality. I would even add that it also provides an insight into the *relation* between these two distinct kinds of being. The being of consciousness, as Husserl points out in *Ideas I* and then repeats throughout his oeuvre, is “absolute”; while the being of reality is “relative”, namely insofar as it is dependent on consciousness, which intends what is real and posits it *as* real. In other words, already an eidetic reduction gives us what Loidolt, with Uwe Meixner, calls the «supervenience of the real, in particular of the physical, on consciousness», which she identifies as what idealism just *is* (LOIDOLT 2015, 119; cf. MEIXNER 2010, 186). In other words, an eidetic reduction already discloses both the *dependency* of the real on consciousness and the *irreducibility* of both.

One way of addressing the proper function of the transcendental reduction (or its dispensability) is to ask what it provides that we do not already get by means of the eidetic reduction. In the first instance,

2 Although I follow Loidolt in the use of the term, one must keep in mind that the term “reality (*Realität*)” is ambiguous. First of all, consciousness can be said to have its own “reality” with its own modalities (possible, actual, necessary); and “reality” in this broad sense is obviously not reducible to “real” objects in the narrow sense of “objects of possible sense experience”, but includes *all* possible objectivities, real or ideal.

the transcendental reduction enables the confirmation of the eidetic distinction *by phenomenological evidence*. True to the phenomenological method, the distinction between the absolute being of consciousness and the relative being of reality yielded by an eidetic reflection can, from the transcendental point of view, serve as no more than an hypothesis *until it is confirmed by concrete phenomenological investigations*.³ This is why Husserl says, in the passage from the *Cartesian Meditations* I quoted above, that «*the proof of this idealism is (...) phenomenology itself*». Secondly, the transcendental reduction opens up further transcendental-phenomenological investigations of both consciousness and reality as well as of the relation between the two. In the course of these investigations, Husserl finds evidence that demands an important qualification of the supervenience claim. This evidence shows that the relation of supervenience does not entail that the being of consciousness «*totally determines (vollständig festlegt)*» the being of reality (which would result in a strong version of supervenience, cf. MEIXNER 2010, 188; cited by LOIDOLT 2015, 110, fn. 24), even though no objectivity is thinkable and, what's more, no objectivity can *be* independently of consciousness.⁴ This is a point worth dwelling on.

The *irreducibility thesis* (i.e., the thesis that consciousness and reality refer to two irreducibly different modes of being) gains strength in its support of Husserl's anti-phenomenalism, as it receives confirmation from the *noematic* investigations begun in *Ideas I*. These investigations show that reality is not dissolvable into contents of consciousness, or reducible to mental or psychical contents, for the simple reason that a material thing «is intrinsically not an experience but instead a totally different kind of being» (Hua 3/1, 71). As Husserl's later *genetic* and

3 In fact, its apodicticity requires yet another step, namely an "apodictic critique" enabled by an "apodictic reduction" like the one Husserl advances in his 1922/23 "Introduction to Philosophy" lecture course. Cf. Hua 35, esp. part 4. This means that even the transcendental idealist position is *initially* a hypothesis. This, by the way, is also true of Kant's transcendental idealism, only that Kant and Husserl seek to confirm this hypothesis by very different means (cf. Jansen 2014).

4 Husserl does not make here a claim concerning the subjective limits of conceivability, but the ontological claim that there can be no objectivities independently of consciousness.

generative investigations demonstrate, this irreducibility cannot be understood as a *linear* emergence, in which all objectivities could be “traced back to” and are ultimately “determined” by subjective acts. Thus, these findings link up with a phenomenological clarification of the *dependency thesis* (i.e., the thesis that reality depends on consciousness). Husserl’s research confirms that objectivities depend on subjective acts, but also that they do so only in a very specific sense. Only subjective acts can “constitute” objectivities *as* objective, and objectivities can only show themselves as objective *to* consciousness.⁵

Consciousness does not depend on objectivities in this regard; it can show itself to itself: «*no real being, no being which is presented and legitimated in consciousness by appearances, (...) is necessary to the being of consciousness itself* (in the broadest sense, the stream of mental processes)» (Hua 3/1, 92)⁶. There is such a thing as reflective self-awareness, which constitutes immediate (though, substantially, by and large neither apodictic nor adequate) *evidence* of the *being* of consciousness itself – even in the case in which the acts of consciousness fail to achieve the concordant unity “world” (i.e., even if the “world” is annihilated, as Husserl’s notorious thought experiment in § 49 of *Ideas I* is meant to demonstrate). In this sense, then, consciousness is absolute (i.e., non-relative), both *epistemologically* and *ontologically*. However, the independence of consciousness from reality *qua* objectivity does not make consciousness strictly self-sufficient; nor is reality epistemologically or ontologically redundant. When Husserl claims that «object, objective being, and consciousness belong *a priori* inseparably together» (Hua 36, 73), this does *not* mean that objectivities are mere “correlates” of consciousness (a claim that can easily be interpreted in an anti-realist, subjectivist fashion). Rather, as Husserl states very clearly, for example, in his writings on

5 This requires not only a possible consciousness, but an actual consciousness (cf. Hua 36; cf. Melle 2010).

6 The point is *not* that, in order to show itself, consciousness does not depend on any objectivity that is “real” (in the narrow sense of not being fictional), but that it does not depend on *any* real objectivity (in the wide sense of being an object of *possible* sense experience).

intersubjectivity,

(...) the concrete Ego (Ich) has in its life as life of consciousness (Bewusstseinsleben) always a core of hyle, of non-Ego, but essentially belonging to the Ego. Without a realm of pregivennesses (Vorgegebenheiten), a realm of constituted unities, constituted as non-Ego (nicht-Ich), no Ego is possible (Hua 14, 379).

As this quote makes clear, *hyle* is specifically *not* meant in an empiricist sense, as an immanent object of introspection, but – *and here we find yet another insight gained by the transcendental reduction* – as an inseparable, by itself non-intentional moment of the intentional sense experience *in virtue of which* an object may be intended (cf. JANSEN 2014, 82).⁷ As Michel Henry, who is known to be in many ways critical of Husserl, and of his treatment of hyle in particular so aptly put it: for Husserl *hyle* is a moment of the «totality of noetic processes in which it is included» (HENRY 2008, 9). It is not “mere” matter, which would receive apprehension by the subject only secondarily⁸, but «*it is the matter of the act that informs it, a matter for this act*» (HENRY 2008, 10; original emphasis). As such, it is immanent and by itself non-intentional, i.e., “*subjective*”, and at the same time, as the quote above from the intersubjectivity writings specifies, also *not of the “subject”*. What might appear contradictory in the constitutive analyses of *Ideas I* is further clarified in Husserl’s genetic account where Husserl enters into the depths of the very emergence of content, which is *originarily*

7 Mark Rowlands also has recently pointed out how empiricist assumptions that reduce consciousness to (the phenomenal content) of mental *states*, which are themselves construed as *objects* of introspection or thought, make it impossible to conceive of consciousness in terms of mental *acts* (and their moments) that are themselves not accessible as objects, but *in virtue of which* we can access any objects at all. However, Rowlands does not consider the ways in which, correlatively, objectivities also condition (“afford” or “illicit”) the acts. His analysis thus only addresses the, to speak with Husserl, “noetic” side of this complex dynamic (cf. ROWLANDS forthcoming, 20-27).

8 This is why Husserl gives up, or at least fundamentally revises his matter-apprehension-schema (cf. Hua 23, text 8 [1909], 265-269; JANSEN 2005, 125; HOLENSTEIN 1972, 86-117).

correlational. By describing the phenomenon of “original”, or “primary association” (Hua 11, 151, 273), as part of his *expressis verbis* “transcendental” account (Hua 1, 114), Husserl arrives at an identification of the *correlation* “affection – affecting non-Ego” as the concrete phenomenological clarification of the formal “primal impression (*Ur-impression*)” (cf. JANSEN 2015, 66-69). The «associative ‘Urstiftung’... plays out as the dynamic back-and-forth of the object’s ‘affective force (*affective Kraft*)’ and the ego’s ‘responsivity (*antwortende Tätigkeit*)’ (Hua 11, 50)» (JANSEN 2015, 68). Consequently, as Rudolf Bernet has summarized it: «There is no original phenomenon without something objective that gives itself and without a dative of this givenness» (BERNET 2015, 117).⁹

Thus, the transcendental reduction is indispensable in at least three different ways: First, it delivers the phenomenological confirmation of the validity of the eidetic insight that the being of consciousness and the being of reality are fundamentally different. Second, the transcendental reduction opens up further transcendental-phenomenological investigations of both consciousness and being as well as of the relation between the two. These, in turn, lead to important qualifications of both the irreducibility thesis and the dependence thesis, which can be won by means of the eidetic reduction alone. Third, the transcendental reduction enables a “transcendental stance” (cf. JANSEN 2014), which considers moments of consciousness as that *in virtue of which* objects may be intended, and not as themselves objects apprehended in introspection.

I agree with De Palma and Loidolt that it is important not to cover over the distinct and crucial differences between important aspects, emphases, and even the fundamental trajectories of the Husserlian and the Kantian accounts. To add to their very helpful distinctions, I would

9 This also means that similarity (besides contrast, fusion, prominence, etc., one basic mode of association) indeed allows “for a transcendental interpretation”, although it cannot, as De Palma rightly observes, be reduced to subjectivity. According to Husserl, similarity is not reducible to a subject that recognizes two items as similar *according to a tertium comparationis*, but as a manifest quality it still *depends* on consciousness to show itself.

also say that Husserl's analyses, unlike Kant's *linear* "top down" deduction, attempt a *complex* account of what Husserl recognizes as a *complex* nexus of moments, dimensions, interdependencies, and feedback loops, in which rigid bivalence is suspended and in which instead relational terms ("subjective"/"objective", noetic/noematic, active/passive, ideal/real, etc.) are required. Here, Loidolt's (2015) emphasis on Husserl's "transcendental *idealism*" has the distinct advantage of reminding us that this idealism is, unlike Kant's "transcendental idealism", irreducible to a consequence of a "transcendental stance". For Husserl's idealism contains not only the eidetic distinction between "consciousness" and "reality", but also his insistence on a dimension of ideality that permeates all layers of reality (in the broad sense of the word), which is thus modalized into its actualities, possibilities, and necessities.

However, I see no reason *not* to recognize Husserl's own use of the "transcendental stance" as an overturning (*Umwälzung*), or radicalization of Kant's transcendental philosophy (cf. HEINÄMAA, HARTIMO, MIETTINEN 2014, 8), whose radicality surely would be lost if we simply called it by another name. What's more, the insistence on too rigid a notion of transcendental philosophy strikes me as not well in tune with Husserl's own approach to the history of philosophy. For his notion of *Besinnung*, performatively demonstrated in the *Crisis*, seems to me to be advocating a much more open attitude that identifies, from one's own explicit historical and cultural standpoint, salient philosophical "motifs" to clarify and enrich one's own account. That's why Husserl not only permits, but encourages us to ...

(...) use the word 'transcendental' in the broadest sense for the motif (...) of inquiring back into the ultimate source of all the formations of knowledge, the motif of the knower's reflecting (*Besinnung*) upon himself and his knowing life (Hua 6, § 26, 97 f.).

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